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SUBJECT: TFGG01: Russian Media on Humanitarian Situation, Regional
Politics

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The conflict in South Ossetia remained a front-page, top-of the news hour topic for Russian media, but the focus shifted from breaking events to refugees and humanitarian needs, and the long-term regional and geopolitical implications. In contrast to CNN's images of tanks and Russian troops in Gori, for the Russian press, the war was over and state-controlled broadcast media supported the Kremlin's line that their goals had been achieved. The print media's wider range of views reflected the editorial stances of its individual ownership - pro-Kremlin Izvestiya highlighted Medvedev's 100 days in office and the victims in Tzkhinvali, while business-oriented Vedemosti introduced topics other than Georgia. Much ink was spilt over the American "role" in the conflict and the future of U.S.-Russian relations. Pundits complimented President Medvedev on his performance during the fighting and on his working relationship with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. End Summary.

It's not about Georgia, it's about America

¶2. (SBU) After having spent the past several days highlighting the alleged American role in the conflict, Russian media squarely placed the issue in the context of the U.S.-Russian (instead of the Russian-Georgian) relationship. Surprisingly, little play was given to the August 13 statements by President Bush or Secretary Rice, but we expect to see a measured reaction on the August 14 evening news.

¶3. (SBU) Kommersant, a business-oriented daily, declared warm relations between Moscow and Washington over. It accused President Bush of threatening Russia with isolation in retaliation for its military success in South Ossetia. Nezavisimaya Gazeta, a centrist newspaper, accused the United States of trying to "punish" Russia. State-controlled Channel One aired a statement by Foreign Minister Lavrov which gave the U.S. a choice between a real partnership with Russia or a "virtual" one with Georgia.

Medvedev and Putin working well together

¶4. (SBU) By coincidence, the 100 day mark of the Medvedev administration was reached August 14, allowing the Russia press to turn attention to the performance of the president and the omnipresent prime minister. All media unanimously praised how well the two were working together. Izvestiya noted that this challenge by a "broad front of Russia's enemies" showed that Putin and Medvedev complimented each other. Komsomolskaya Pravda, a pro-Kremlin tabloid, smugly said that while Medvedev's election was hailed in the West, he has demonstrated himself to be a tough defender of Russian interests. However, Nezavisimaya Gazeta complimented the president on his show of independence from the prime minister and his order to halt the military advance into Georgia.

South Ossetia: the forgotten victim

¶5. (SBU) Russian television continued its barrage of images and reports from South Ossetia highlighting the destruction and "crimes" committed by Georgia. Highlighting the government-declared "Day of Mourning," broadcasts included footage of destroyed cities, reports from refugee camps, and ordinary Russians giving blood. Moskovskiy Komsomolets, a well-read tabloid newspaper, dedicated a full page to color photos of the ruins from the conflict zone. Komsomolskaya Pravda, Russia's highest circulated daily, carried reports of funerals for Tskhinvali residents accompanied by a large photo of a woman weeping atop a coffin. Both newspapers also ran extensive stories on Russian soldiers killed in the conflict with pictures of their widows and orphaned children.

¶6. (SBU) While much of the Russian press was reveling in the righteousness of Russia's cause, Interfax, an independent wire service, ran a story about how Russian troops were leaving the city of Gori intact, with water and electricity service for the civilian population. The article noted that both Georgian officials and foreign ambassadors had visited the city (presumably to confirm the reports of its intact condition.) In addition, Moskovskiy Komsomolets queried Embassy Moscow as to why it did not lower its flag to half staff in honor of the victims of the conflict.

Lessons for the region?

¶7. (SBU) On a more ominous note, while the Hitler-Saakashvili comparisons abounded in the media, Saakashvili was also compared to other troublesome regional leaders. Izvestiya ran a box article entitled "Little Allies" which included photos of Polish President

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Kaczinski, Lithuanian President Adamkus, Ukrainian President Yushenko, and a rather unflattering portrait of Saakashvili. Few papers and no broadcast covered the August 13 appearance of the Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Ukrainian presidents in solidarity with Saakashvili in Tbilisi.

¶8. (SBU) Nezavisimaya Gazeta ran a front page story predicting that the conflict in the Caucasus would transfer to the Russian-Ukrainian border. Channel One cited an Interfax report accusing Ukraine of being involved in the fighting on the side of the Georgians.

Paging Dr. Freud

¶9. (U) Komsomolskaya Pravda continued the media's psychoanalysis/character assassination of Saakashvili under the headline: "Saakashvili has been offended since childhood - and now he is dying to prove that he is not weak." The tabloid resurrected claims that the Georgian president's stepfather beat him, and that he has been unfaithful to his wife with a Georgian pop singer and his secretary.